

The City of Athens.¹ (slide.1)

As Mark shared a couple of weeks ago, we're using this time between Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday to look at the resurrection of Jesus, and how the declaration of this message played out in the book of Acts. In particular we're looking at the five major stories in Acts that focus both on the declaration of this message and the response of those who first heard it. Mark already walked us through the first two stories. Today's story is found in chapter 17. It takes place in the city of Athens. We'll consider how the Apostle Paul communicated the message of the gospel *specifically in the language of the people*. We'll also consider how Paul's message—especially his message of the resurrection—proved offensive to many of those who were there on that day. Lee already read the first part of our text, so let's begin by looking to our Lord in prayer (slide/black.2).

In earlier centuries, Athens represented the highpoint of learning. It was the center for art and literature; it was also the center for philosophy. It had been the *native* home of Socrates and Plato, and the *adopted* home of a host of a boatload of other philosophers. Even after the rise of Rome, Athens was still the intellectual capital of the empire.² So here's Paul (slide.3); he's in the middle of it all. He's waiting around for his coworkers. What does he decide to do? He decides to go sightseeing, and in doing so, (slide.4) his spirit is "provoked." The word translated used here speaks of more than a little annoyance. No, Paul is "infuriated/ticked off."³ He's ticked off because he sees that the city is full of pagan idols. The history books tell us that, of all the cities of the Roman Empire, no city had more idols than the city of Athens. A Roman satirist (slide.5) living around that time, a guy named Petronius, wrote that (slide.6) "*In Athens, it is easier to find a god than (slide.7) a man*"⁴

So (slide/black.8) what does Paul do? I suppose if he lived in our day and age, he might have brought awareness to his displeasure by posting a series of snarky comments on social media. But he doesn't do that. Instead, he hits the streets. He goes (slide.9) to the synagogue (he does that first). But he also goes to (slide.10) "the marketplace." Now when we hear the word "marketplace" we picture a mall, or a shopping center, or maybe an open-air farmer's market. And in a sense, it was that, but it was also much more than that. The marketplace was the cultural center of the ancient world.

Everything took place there. Businesspeople did business, officials officiated, heralds heralded, poets recited their latest poems, artists displayed their latest works of art, musicians introduced their latest songs, and philosophers debated their latest ideas. But Paul is not there to shop or to listen to music. No, Paul went there with the gospel.

It's interesting, we read in verse 17 that Paul (slide.11) "reasoned" both in the synagogue and in the marketplace. The Greek word (slide.12) used here refers to something more than a lecture or a debate. *You can see it in the word itself.* It refers to a *dialog*. That word speaks of (slide.13) "mingling thought with thought." It speaks of listening, and asking questions, and seeking to understand the argument being made.⁵ So while Paul is reasoning/dialoging (slide.14), a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers show up and begin to push back. Some of them make fun of Paul and call him a "babbler." Others remark that "he seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities" because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.⁶

So here's what these Greeks do: they invite Paul to a meeting at this place called the (slide.15) Areopagus. The Areopagus was a gathering on a hill overlooking the marketplace where matters of justice, education, and philosophy were discussed and debated.⁷ It's still there to this day, located just outside of the Acropolis, and remains (slide.16) a popular tourist destination.

Paul Enters Their World.

So here's Paul (slide.17); he's invited to the big kids table. He stands before this elite group of Athenian philosophers, and it's noteworthy to see the approach he takes. First off, here's what he doesn't do. He does not open up his mouth and say (slide.18), "*You guys are stupid and everything you believe is stupid.*" He doesn't do that; instead, Paul continues (slide.19) to dialog with them. And look how he does it; two things. Number one (slide.20): **He enters their world.** He seeks to find common ground/common language; he says (slide.21):

²² "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: "to an unknown god.""⁸

Here's the Apostle Paul; we already know that "his spirit was provoked" over these idols in Athens. But then he sees one that's different from the rest; one dedicated to (slide.22) an unknown god. We don't know exactly why it's there, but Paul sees something in that altar's inscription. At bare minimum he sees is an intuitive sense among these Athenians that there must be something more out there.

I think many people we know are like that. To be honest, it's really hard to find a full-throated committed atheist who is consistent. Even when people contend that they are, there is still a piece of them that often betrays that line of thought. Paul will later talk about this in the first

chapter of his letter to the Romans where he speaks of the existence of God as something those who do not believe deliberately suppress; almost as if it's a watermark that's built into our DNA that one volitionally chooses to push away.

So Paul says (slide.23), *"What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."* He declares that:

²⁶ From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

²⁷ God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us.

Now, here's the crazy thing about this statement. Everything Paul says in these two verses is rooted (slide.24) in the Hebrew Scriptures. Everything he says here alludes to ideas that are found elsewhere in the OT.⁹ So you would think that this would be the moment when Paul would pull out his Bible and start quoting Scripture. But he doesn't do that. Instead, what does he do? He quotes (slide.25) two of their own philosophers and poets (we've talked about this before). The first quote (slide.26) (*"In Him we live and move and have our being"*) comes from a poet named Epimenides. The second quote (slide.27) (*"For we are His offspring"*) comes from a Stoic philosopher named Arátus. And the crazy thing is that, at least on the surface, the two poems are not speaking about God/Yahweh. No, both poems are speaking about *the Greek god* (slide.28) *Zeus!*¹⁰ But Paul doesn't seem to care because he knows, ultimately, to whom these words belong. These words do not belong to Zeus; they belong to the one true God!

What's Paul doing? (slide.29) He's building a bridge; he's finding common ground. And in doing so he's letting these Athenians there on the Areopagus know that what he is saying is not as foreign as it may sound. And the reason why it's not as foreign as it may sound is because the people he is speaking to are made in the image and likeness of God. And because the people he's speaking to are made in the image and likeness of God, there is something about this God that already resonates —*whether they acknowledge it or not*. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul is not only speaking to these Athenians in their **spoken** language (Greek), he's also speaking to these Athenians in their **cultural** language. He's showing that there are connections/commonalities/bridges between the story of Scripture and the stories within this first-century Athenian culture. And if we look closely enough, we see the same in our own day and age. Honestly, if the Apostle Paul were here, he could go outside these doors and legitimately say (slide.30), *"People of Tampa Bay, I perceive that in every way you are very religious."*

We talk about this often; we look at our cultural artifacts. We look, for example, at (slide.31) the music around us. Some of it is old; some is new. Some might be familiar; some might not. But of those songs we recognize, what do we see? We see some songs that speak of the beauty of our world. We see other songs that speak of the brokenness of our world. We see a few songs that do both. *But make no mistake—each and every one of them is a religious statement!* We look at the (slide.32) stories/narratives around us. Our films, our TV shows, our books. Some of these stories are angry; some of them are sad. Some cry out for purpose and meaning; others cry out for justice and hope. *But again, make no mistake—each and every one of them is a religious statement!*

I love how (slide.33) David Carson puts it. Carson is not a theologian; I'm pretty sure he's not even a believer. He runs a very famous graphic design firm in NYC, but in many ways, he puts it best. He's what he writes; he writes that (slide.34): *"You cannot not communicate. If you say nothing, that says something. If you don't respond, that's your response. If you say you have no religion, that is your religion."*¹¹

Paul Challenges Their Assumptions.

So first off, Paul (slide.35) enters the world of these Athenians. He uses their cultural language as he shows them the connections and bridges between their stories and God's story. But he doesn't leave them there. No, out of love (slide.36), **he also challenges their assumptions.** Paul does not look at their altar to an unknown god and say (slide.37), *"Hey, this is really great. I think you're onto something. Keep looking inside. I'm sure you'll find the truth you're looking for."*

No, Paul pushes some buttons and pinches some toes. And if we look back in our text, we see that he does so from almost (slide.38) the very beginning.

- When he declares that (slide.39) *"From one man [God] made all the nations,"* Paul is pushing back at a belief that was central in the minds of many of the Greeks, especially within the ruling class. Within the ruling class, there was the belief that there was an actual fundamental, difference between different members of society: between Greeks and non-Greeks else, between citizens and non-citizens, between slave and free, between noblemen, soldiers, and farmers. For many, this extended into the strange teaching that each member of each class was born with a different metal in the soul: gold for the upper classes, silver for the middle classes, and bronze and iron for laborers.¹² Sadly, forms of this same thinking can be found in our own day and age. But here's Paul, long before anyone entertained notions of equality, pushing against this idea.

- When Paul spoke of God (slide.40) "*marking out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their land*," he's pushing hard (especially against the Epicureans) who believed that the gods almost certainly did not exist, but if they did, they were a zillion miles away and indifferent to human affairs, let alone the notion of a God having a say as to when and where one would be born.¹³ Paul is speaking of a personal God.
- When Paul rebukes (slide.41) these Greeks for thinking that they can fashion gods out of gold, silver, and stone, he's showing these Athenians the *problem* with their manufactured gods. The problem with these manufactured gods is that they're too small—certainly too small to bear the full weight of their humanity. The Greeks somehow got it into their heads that the Divine Being, the God of the Universe could somehow be contained in something manmade, something that could be shaped and manipulated. Paul is saying that that's not true. Yet, in truth, in our brokenness, we can be guilty of the same. This is true, not only for those who do not profess the Christian faith, but also often true for those who do. We create a god, maybe not of gold/silver/stone, but still one which aligns with our wishes/choice/preferences.

That's a lot. But then Paul takes the gloves off. He tells these Greeks that (slide.42):

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead.

Everything Paul says here in these verses would have rubbed these Athenians the wrong way. The call (slide.43) to **repent** would have sounded crazy. While the ancient Greeks had a concept of regret and of remorse, repentance (especially a repentance one owed to God) was not at all on their radar. Even stranger was Paul's warning (slide.44) of God's coming day of **judgment**. Who in the world would ever want to hear about that? But the absolute strangest of all would have been Paul's reference (slide.45) to the **resurrection** of Jesus.¹⁴

The Offense of the Resurrection.

The Epicureans and Stoics did not see eye to eye on a lot of things, but both groups agreed that there was no resurrection—*certainly not a resurrection that was physical*. This was true even among the Greeks who still worshipped the gods and goddesses of Olympus.¹⁵ Maybe your soul/energy is freed from your body and returns to some nebulous place, but not a resurrection that results in something physical and substantive. No, for these Greeks, Paul's words on the resurrection sounded outrageous and (if we're to be honest) continue to sound outrageous.

You see (slide/black.46), throughout church history well-meaning thinkers and theologians have suggested that the Christian faith would be more palatable/acceptable to others if we could just strip it of its supernatural elements—the authority of Scripture, the virgin birth, the miracles of Jesus, and especially the resurrection. (Mark talked about this a couple of months so ago when he talked about Thomas Jefferson's cut-n-paste Bible.)

Why create barriers to entry? Why add hidden fees? Why not simply focus instead on Jesus' teachings and on His moral example, and set aside the parts that are miraculous? But for Paul and for the other apostles, it's not that easy.

You see, the resurrection of Jesus is more than a nice story. Instead, it is the center of God's plan for history and the proof that what Jesus taught and did was true. We look at other systems of thought, and they often look like (slide.47) blocks of virtue and values from which we can pick and choose. *"I like this concept of justice; I like this message of hope."* But the Christian faith is different. It looks more like (slide.48) this. Not a collection of tenets and values from which we can pick and choose, but instead something rests against an event/keystone that is the center and focus of every gathering and (in some sense) part of sermon and song. ***So what happens if (slide.49) that keystone falls? The whole structure falls apart!*** No other religion does that; no other religion makes itself that vulnerable. Paul says it best in (slide.50) the 15th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians. *He writes that if Christ has not been raised, if He wasn't bodily raised, your faith is vain/useless and your still in your sins.* Paul doesn't say, *"Hey, hang in there; Christianity still a pretty good way to live."* No, he says, *"Let us eat and drink, tomorrow we die."* For Paul, if the resurrection is false, Christianity is a sham. But if it's true, it has a total demand on our lives.¹⁶

What's (slide.51) Paul doing? He's preaching an Easter Sunday sermon—and is preaching it to a bunch of Greek philosophers. In doing so, Paul is challenging their assumptions. He's exhorting them to embrace a God that is far larger/greater/more personal than anything they might have imagined. Not a god who is "unknown," but a Triune God who has made Himself known. He's preaching Christ—the one in whom we "live and move and have our being." This Jesus who lived and died and rose from the dead.

Paul (slide.52) engages in conversation with the philosophers/educated. A few respond positively, but not many (slide.53). The cultural elites sneered at Paul (especially when he spoke of the resurrection of Christ). But the irony of the scene is that, within a few generations, Christianity

swept that society and completely changed the **dominant cultural ideas**. And the culture that looked at Christianity at that point and said, "*This is silly/ridiculous. What intelligent person would believe that?*" Within a couple of hundred years, pretty much *all* intelligent people believed it.¹⁷

This is the message of the gospel (slide/black.54).

This is the message of the work of Christ.

The message we are called to carry with us.

We are *clean* because of the sacrifice of another. We're *set free* because of the resurrection of another. We're *made alive*, not because we worked up the ability comply with a set of rules, or because we've mastered a set of techniques. No, we're made clean, and set free, and made alive because of the one who paid the price, and died in our place, and embraces our brokenness, and raises us from death, and seats us with Him at the right hand of the Father.

Let's pray.

¹ OT reading: Prov 1:20-23 (ESV).

² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 329.

³ The LXX uses this same Greek word to translate the Hebrew word describing God's holy jealousy. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 366.

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 277–78.

⁵ David John Williams, *Acts*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 294; Timothy Keller, "The Gospel to the Philosophers" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

⁶ Some speculate that some of those listening thought that "resurrection" (Anastasia) as well as "Jesus" were actual names that were being endorsed by Paul as new deities to add to the Mount Olympian pantheon. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 367; N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Acts: Rediscovering What the Church Was And Is* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 103.

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 562-63; Wright, *The Challenge of Acts*, 102.

⁸ Writing just a few centuries later, Tertullian and Jerome note that these kinds of "unknown god" altars were common in Greece. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 286.

⁹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 373.

¹⁰ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT, 338-39; Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 568; Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SRC, 529.

¹¹ Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, "The Other End of Print: David Carson, Graphic Design, and the Aesthetics of Media," *MIT Communications Forum*, 1/25/00, 2000.

¹² Plato's "Myth of the Metals" (or Noble Lie) in *Republic* (Book III) is a foundational tale designed to ensure social harmony and justify the hierarchical structure of his ideal city.

¹³ Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1997), 195.

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 377.

¹⁵ Johnson, *The Message of Acts*, 200; Mark L. Strauss, "Acts," *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 1989. The exception would be among specific traditions, such as elements of Orphism, which suggested a cycle of reincarnation in the afterlife for the just, but still not a return to the physical body left on earth.

¹⁶ Timothy Keller, "Easter" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 1995).

¹⁷ Keller, "The Gospel to the Philosophers" (2013).